

[Taking Care of Myself]

Mari Tomasi Men Against Granite [?]

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TAKING CARE OF MYSELF

"The way I look at it you got to have money to live, and if you can get it without breaking your back, so much the better. Changing sheets and polishing mirrors isn't the best job in the world, but it's not the worst, either. I got this room, a little salary, and they throw in the meals, too. You can't be too fussy, it don't pay. I'm satisfied."

It was a top story hotel room. Mollie sat sideways on the broad window sill. She was large and florid. The low forehead was almost hidden by thick, reddish bangs. Her hands, large boned and rough were never at rest. Always poking along the wall, the sill, the window, or at an imaginary speck of dust on her dress. She had strong, healthy teeth, and the wide mouth opened often in a smile to show them.

"I could pick plenty of fights with the other chamber maids, if I had a mind to," Mollie said. "There's always enough to argue about. I got enough of that the first day I came here about five years ago. A fighting welcome I called it. There was a couple of girls had been taking turns doing up one of the best rooms downstairs. When the fellow left they found an envelope on the bureau addressed to The Chamber Maid, and inside were three one dollar bills. Well, each one swore it was for her. One even said he'd told her he was going to leave the money for her. They got to fighting, pulling hair and slapping each other. And

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that's the way I found 'em the first day I came here. Fighting like mad for three dollars. Somebody finally made 'em see sense, told 'em to split it. So they took a dollar and a half each. The next day they were as good friends as if nothing had happened. But that fight kind of prepared me. I mind my own business and keep things to myself as much as I can.

2 “I like this better than housework,” Mollie said. “You work in a house just so long and you feel too obliged to them. Feel as if you got to do more than they ask you to do. You know where the State garages are halfway between Barre and Montpelier? That's where I was born. On a farm up the hill in back of the State garages. There was a park up there called Caledonia Park. Folks used to come up there to picnic a lot. Whole families. They had swings and teeter boards for the kids. Sometimes we could hear their fun from the farm. Us kids 'ud sneak out of the house and over to the party. They'd always give us something to eat.

“Sometimes there'd be a bunch of wops there witch accordians and fiddles. That's what we [kiked?]. Music and fun. We didn't have nothing to play music at home. Once me and Al—he's my brother, a year and half older than me— got to playing with some kids at a picnic. They gave us a taste of wine, the first we ever had. Real wop wine, sour and strong. We had only a half glass each but Pa smelled it on our breath when we got home. He was fit to be tied. Mad as a hornet. Said he'd tell the police about those dam wops teaching little kids to drink. We told him it was the kids who give it to us, that cooled him down some but he was still mad. Pa didn't have it in him to do much drinking, except on holidays. He had the craving but he was just plain scared. His own father was lamed for life on account of drinking too much.

“Speaking of wops, my stars, they used to get an awful [razzing?] those days. It's changed now. There's a pile of 'em here in town. Honest, hardworking, and decent. They're well liked. But where I lived on the farm when I was a kid there wasn't no wop family around for about three miles. We didn't see very many of them. [Pa?] neither. An old Italian 'ud drive his meat wagon up our way twice a week selling meat and groceries. He had a bell in the wagon and we'd hear him coming long before [we'd?] see him. We'd run out from

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wherever we were to catch a sight of him. He had the longest moustache we kids 'ud ever seen. Black and drooping. That's changing now, too. They're cutting 'em off around here. This Italian's name was Pete. We'd run down the road after his meat wagon yelling- 'Pete, Pete, The [dago?] cheat.'

"He didn't get mad at us. He'd just laugh. Pa and Ma 'ud hear us screaming after him but they never said nothing to us. They should of, but they didn't. Guess they felt the same way we did. When we were fair grown up we stopped yelling at him. I can't understand how Pa was so strict about liquor and yet he'd let us go on hurting that poor wop's feelings.

"Pa was scared out of drinking by what happened to his father. There was a lot of fine maples up a piece from our farm. Every year come spring [Gramp?] 'ud tap 'em for sap. He never made sugar cakes. Said it was too much trouble. The boiling down used up too much good fire wood. He just boiled the sap to syrup. Gramp's accident happened during one of those sap runs. Frosty nights, and warm, sunny days, we were having. Gramp 'ud been drinking too much that day. He was a great one for mixing up rum and sap. Half a glass of rum; and the other, half, fresh, cold sap just dripped from the spout. I never seen nobody else drink it that way. I've tasted it though, and it sure is good. Well, by mid afternoon poor Gramp had a good edge on. There was still a lot of snow on the ground, the soft, sticky kind we get in the spring. He was leading a horse through the woods, dragging a sledge full of wooden sap buckets. He was singing and chewing away on his old corn cob, when all of a sudden the sledge runners struck a piece of bare rock that was jutting out of the snow. The sledge slowed, and somehow Gramp got a leg locked in between the sap buckets. If he'd been sober 4 he might have managed to free himself. But he was full of rum and sap. He just lay there on his back and let the horse drag him through the woods. He rode on his back in the snow all the way down the hill. A good mile it was. He never could walk good again. Always sort of dragged his leg after him. That's why Pa's down on liquor.

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“Gramp was born in Vermont. His people were Scotch, they'd come over from New York. They had a farm on a clearing up the northeastern part of the State. Gramp went on caring for it after his folks died, but he couldn't make it pay. People around them parts just let their farms run down to nothing. Gramp said the folks let their land go to timber so much that you couldn't find a grazing field for the cows and sheep. Gramp couldn't stand it any more. There was two farmhouses in sight of his own house, and now they'd been empty and no smoke coming from 'em in two years. He got so lonesome he just packed up one day and left the place. Left it to whoever wanted it, I guess. Wasn't much good, anyhow. He came down here then, up back of the State garages and bought himself a farm. The same place where I was born. Six of us was born there, and my own father, too.”

The short sleeves of Mollie's cotton dress were tight around thick, freckled arms. She studied the brown splotched flesh speculatively. “I was always a big, husky kid. When I was 15 I looked 21. That's when I got my first job working out, when I was fifteen. I hired out by the day to some folks on the Barre road. The woman dressmaked and the husband was a part owner of a small stone shed. She was good to me. Not always puttin' on airs like some folks who can afford hired help.

“There used to be a young man'd come to the house selling tools and things for the shed. A salesman. I was eighteen then. He began noticing me, and then he came around real often. Just a young squirt he was. Seemed more 5 kiddish than me. I was always a husky kid. Well, we got engaged. And the woman I worked for gave me an old chest and helped me fill it. If she got new tablecloths, napkins, or towels, she'd give me her old ones. Pa kind of shied of Nat. Said he didn't think much of anyone who made a living sticking his nose in other people's houses all the time.

“Pa said to watch out for him. He said these salesmen were all the same. Said they all left their conscience to home because a conscience kind of hindered their good time and cluttered up their getting around. Well, it come about two weeks before the wedding and I received a letter from New Jersey. From Nat. He came right to the point. Said as how

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he was sorry he'd led me along, and he was already married. The woman I worked for got someone to look into it, and sure enough he was already married. I'M 44 now and nobody's got me so close to a wedding ring as Nat did. I can work. I'm better off working and taking care of myself.

"I've seen a lot of salesmen right here in this hotel. Got pictures of their wives and kids on the bureau. It makes me wonder if some of these local girls are getting fooled like Nat fooled me.

"We don't get the class here that you'd get in some of the hotels in town. But most of 'em are nice enough folks. Nearly all men. Sometimes I thank my stars I got a plain face and a bad shape. It keeps the men away from me. And you never can tell when you're going to bump into one as deceiving as Nat.

"I don't get lonesome. Three evenings a week me and Ruth - she's another chamber maid, - go to the movies. We got three movie houses in town, so we try 'em all. Ruth's sister is married to an Italian stonecutter. His mother showed her how to cook spaghetti, ravioli, chicken- with-wine— all Italian dishes. I never say 'no' when she asks me to supper. Couple years ago we had an Italian chef downstairs, but he left for a job in one of those downstreet 6 restaurants that specialize in Italian foods. Our boss didn't care; we don't get much call for Italian good here. If folks want it, they go where it's a special. Ruth's sister [s ?] learned to crochet since she got married. Her mother-in-law's house is filled with crocheted pieces. Pillows, mats, bedspreads, even curtains. Lately, I been going over there to learn from her. But I guess my fingers're too big and clumsy. I can't hold the hook."

Mollie gave up her window seat for the bed. It sagged under her weight.

"Speaking a while back about Gramp reminds me of something I heard last week. Remember his old farm I told you about? Well, Gramp's brother's niece lives there now

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with her husband. Sort of cousin to me, I guess. They got a hired girl, but I don't know what they'd need her for.

They still believe in that bundling business up in those parts. Bundling, mind you! My stars, parking under the same blanket with a stranger, maybe. It's hard to believe, but the folks that told me ought to know. Anyway, the hired girl went a little further than plain bundling. She's got a baby. My cousin and her husband are taking care of it, if you please. Like it's one of the family. There's certainly funny things go on in this world."

An alarm clock shrilled from the next room. Mollie said, "That's Ruth, the other chamber maid. It's our turn to get working. Guess I sort of talked myself out anyway."